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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [IS](#) [KPAL](#) [IR](#) [SY](#) [LE](#) [KWBG](#)
SUBJECT: OLMERT'S "SWAN SONG" INTERVIEW SPARKS DEBATE AND
CRITIQUES

Classified By: DCM Luis G. Moreno. E.O. 12958. Reason 1.4 (B/D)

11. (C) Summary: Olmert's widely read Jewish New Year interview on the Palestinian and Syrian negotiation tracks (see paras 2 and 3 below) struck Israeli pundits as both bold and problematic. Commentators on the left, such as Meretz MK Yossi Beilin, criticized Olmert for talking the talk on the need to end Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories and the Syrian Golan, but not walking the walk, while the right denounced Olmert's words as further evidence of his betrayal of the concept of Greater Israel and United Jerusalem. A thread common to both camps was the generally shared distrust of Olmert himself. NRP MK Aryeh Eldad, who has been a regular critic of the prime minister's alleged corruption, used Olmert's professed mistakes (e.g., voting against the peace treaty with Egypt in 1978; championing undivided Jerusalem throughout most of his political career) reportedly commented: "Anyone who says he was mistaken for 35 years cannot be believed." Absent from Olmert's "legacy" interview was any acknowledgment of wrongdoing, personal or professional, during his thirty months as prime minister. In fact, on the personal front, Olmert professed his view that he will emerge unscathed from ongoing investigations, and argued that the state controller (and other investigators) "was going after me even before I was elected prime minister." On Lebanon, where his leadership decisions were roundly criticized, Olmert maintained that "when the day comes to tell the whole story about the Lebanon war, the picture will look entirely different than it did" (to Olmert's critics). Olmert probably intended his remarks to initiate a national debate, but the short term political effect is to put Livni on the spot, particularly his comments on Jerusalem. End Summary.

The Palestinians:
Territorial Withdrawal, including Jerusalem

12. (C) PM Olmert gave a customary in-depth interview September 29 with Israel's largest-circulation newspaper, Yediot Ahronoth, on the occasion of the Jewish New Year (September 30). Typically, Israeli prime ministers use such occasions to provide a "state of the union" assessment to the general public; however, Olmert and the editors pitched his remarks as his swan song. Painting himself among (if not above) the pantheon of Israeli prime ministers (Sharon, Netanyahu, Barak and Rabin) who have negotiated peace with the Palestinians but failed to achieve peace, Olmert declared to Yediot Ahronoth correspondents Nahum Barnea and Shimon Shiffer that Israel would have to withdraw from almost all Palestinian territories. "Arik Sharon spoke about painful prices, but refused to elaborate them. ...In the end, we will have to withdraw from the lion's share of the territories, and for the territories we leave in our hands, we will have to give compensation in the form of territories within the State of Israel at a ratio that is more or less one-to-one." Olmert stressed that "I want to lead the State of Israel towards this juncture, towards a decision" but did not quantify the exact percentages of territory that he

thought must be exchanged with the Palestinians. Breaking the taboo his coalition has placed on talking about Jerusalem, Olmert forecast that a decision to divide the city would be required, as the only other alternative: "bringing 270,000 Arabs inside the fences of sovereign Israel" won't work. He said he envisioned "special solutions" for the Temple Mount and other sacred sites, but dwelt more on his own myopia as Jerusalem mayor than on options for the future: "I am the first who wanted to enforce Israeli sovereignty on the entire city. I admit it. I am not trying to justify retroactively what I did for 35 years. For a large portion of those years, I was unwilling to look at reality in all its depth."

The Syrians:
Start from the Endgame on the Golan Heights

13. (C) Recalling how former PM Menachem Begin dispatched Moshe Dayan to tell the Egyptians that Israel was prepared to withdraw from all of Sinai before Sadat decided to visit Jerusalem, Olmert underscored that Israel would have to give up the entire Golan Heights in negotiations with Syria. Olmert recapitulated this episode to make the point that Begin "started from the end" before negotiating the terms of Israeli withdrawal; Olmert stressed that "if we are not willing to say this (re: the Golan Heights), (then) all the talk about talks with Syria is worthless." Olmert stressed the value of negotiations over the cost of a fruitless war with Syria, and warned of the dangers of viewing future regional threats through the lens of the past. "Because the

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only fears that we listen to are the fears we have already experienced, not the fears we have not yet experienced. Once the thought that a division of Syrian tanks was standing on the Golan Heights and could move into the State of Israel, justifiably frightened us. Today we live in a different reality. We have the tools to stop a ground offensive without taking control of a single meter in Syria." In return, Olmert insisted that Syria would have to "give up their relationship with Iran as it now exists; they will have to give up their relationship with Hizballah; they will have to give up the continued backing they are giving to Hamas terrorism, the Al-Qaida terrorism and the jihad in Iraq."

Blasting others for failed thinking
on the PA, Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, Iran

14. (C) Olmert used the interview to chastise his critics for failed strategic thinking (vis a vis the Palestinian issue and the Syrian track): "I read the words spoken by our retired generals, and I say, how is it possible that they have not learned anything and have not forgotten anything. ... they are still living in the War of Independence or the Sinai campaign. With them it is all about tanks and land and controlling territories and controlled territories and this hilltop or that hilltop. All these things are worthless." Olmert gave no indication of using the same yardstick to his own policy decisions, particularly those involving the Second Lebanon War. On Lebanon, where his leadership decisions in going to war were roundly criticized as lacking strategic vision, Olmert maintained that "when the day comes to tell the whole story about the Lebanon war, the picture will look entirely different than it did (to Olmert's critics)." On Gaza, conversely, Olmert argued that Sharon's decision to withdraw was sound. Moreover, he rejected "the view posed by those who say we should make a renewed assault on Gaza and take control of it. The price we will pay for this matter are not worth any benefit that we will derive." Olmert differentiated between the need for Israel to engage with its immediate neighbors, and the Iranian issue, which is a threat to the entire international community. "Part of our

megalomania and our loss of proportions is the things that are said about Iran."

Comment

15. (C) Olmert's candid remarks on the likely endgames of Palestinian and Syrian negotiations represent the culmination of a five-year period of gradual evolution in his thinking about land and peace. But they also constitute an effort to create a rhetorical legacy that will bind his successor to specific positions (e.g., one-to-one land swaps with the Palestinians; a return to the Rabin "deposit" on the Golan) on which there is little room to maneuver. This is also the first time Olmert has personally gone on record in specificity about final status issues that he (and Livni) have been secretly discussing with Palestinian counterparts for nearly a year. The Israeli public has not been briefed on these negotiations to date nor seen any action on the ground that corresponds to the PM's rhetoric. And Olmert himself acknowledged that the Israeli government that he heads is "impossible" -- relying as it does on a coalition regime and "an almost endless system of maneuvering in order to maintain a majority." Olmert clearly feels he is an honest victim of this system, and makes no admission of wrongdoing for the actions for which the Israeli public and media hold him responsible. Olmert's current image as Israel's most corrupt prime minister, whether or not borne out by fact, undercuts his attempt to engage the public on the critical importance of negotiations with Israel's neighbors. Critics from both ends of the spectrum question whether in being so specific on several key points, he will tie the hands of Livni -- both in forming a coalition and in continuing negotiations with the Palestinians and the Syrians. Moreover, his faint-praise labeling of Livni as "a capable leader" may only serve to undercut what waning influence he has left. End Comment.

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